

# India's outdated approach to education is hurting students and academia

August 14 2014, by Vishwesh Guttal

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An institute with a great history. Credit: Pp391, CC BY

I joined the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) a few years ago for two main reasons. It offered academic freedom and the best research opportunities in India. But also, unlike most research institutions, IISc puts more emphasis on research by offering a four-year undergraduate program in basic sciences, compared to the usual three-year program. This gave me an opportunity to interact with talented students passionate

about science. However, recently both the academic freedom and the innovative undergraduate program of IISc have faced threat from the country's regulatory body.

Last week, India's University Grants Commission (UGC), a government regulatory and funding body for [higher education](#), [directed IISc to scrap the four-year program](#). The reason for doing so had nothing do with the quality of education. Instead it was alleged that IISc "failed" to follow a national policy 1986 that requires the bachelor degrees in science to be three years. Experiments in higher education, according to UGC, are not allowed.

Only a month ago, UGC forced Delhi University, one of the few universities in the country offering good quality undergraduate education, to scrap a similar program. At about the same time it issued [new rules](#) that put dual-degree programs at the Indian Institutes of Technology in doubt. These programs offer a bachelor's and a master's degree at the end of the course, and they have helped retain students in academia and promote doctoral research.

Although it appears that [a compromise](#) has been reached with IISc after UGC faced [criticism](#) from top scientists of India, these moves could push the brightest students of India away from choosing a career in science. It could threaten innovation in higher education that is in bad need of an overhaul.

## Why four years?

India has adopted the UK's model of three-year BSc program for more than 50 years, but the quality of most of the programs is abysmal. A [paper prepared jointly by three Indian science academies in 2008](#) identified various limitations of the present system that focuses on quantity of information rather than the quality of education. The report

argued for a four-year program with an emphasis on flexibility in curriculum, choice of subjects and research experience. They also recommended allowing students to switch between science and engineering.

India's requirement as a large and diverse country cannot and should not rely on a failed mode of higher education uniformly imposed across the entire country. Experiments to improve education must be encouraged, especially if the premier institutes of the country are taking the lead. We can only know what works best if we attempt a variety of approaches.

## **Where's my freedom?**

These recent directives by UGC are troubling and raise concerns about academic freedom that is vital to institutions aiming to reach excellence. If a few academic institutions such as IISc have been able to maintain quality in research and education, it is because of lack of interference from higher authorities on how to conduct their academic work. Directives such as this one from the UGC could set a precedent for more to follow in the future.

It is ironic that the new Indian government which seems to be doing everything to reduce regulations, [from making it easy to obtain environmental clearances and to acquire lands](#) to facilitate industrial growth, must scuttle the growth of knowledge sector by enhancing regulations.

We need to ask what ought to be [the role of UGC](#) in the higher education. As it stands, UGC plays the roles of advising, regulating and funding agency of nearly all universities in India, and the government in power has huge control over it. This means significant powers are vested in a single body with conflicts of interest. This must change.

## **What should be done?**

We do need oversight and regulation that ensure the highest quality in all academic endeavours and state funding to sustain higher education. But these must be conducted by different and competent agencies with minimal interference from the government.

Now is also the time for scientists to come out, speak up and engage with both the public and policymakers to ensure India has a good higher education system. These academics, including me, have responsibility towards students who expect high quality education from Indian universities and institutions.

The institutions, too, must reform from within. They have held age-old hierarchical structures with powers vested with the top few. Unless the internal functioning is democratised, made transparent and accountable to the public, scientists can't expect authorities in the government to do so.

As I write this article from a conference abroad, I am reminded how the undergraduate program of IISc, that was threatened to be scrapped, offers the flexibility comparable to major universities in the world. To mention an example from my own lab, I have a student who is majoring in physics and has keen interest in pursuing research in ecology. He is looking to apply those ideas not just in ecology but also to analyse data from financial systems. Such ventures are unlikely in a typical university set up governed by UGC rules where rigid walls between different disciplines is the norm.

It is not too late for the new government to reverse the direction of discourse on higher education in India. It could start by initiating a debate on restructuring, and revising the mandate of UGC.

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Citation: India's outdated approach to education is hurting students and academia (2014, August 14) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-08-india-outdated-approach-students-academia.html>

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